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THE PIASA.

BY FREDERICK E. VOELKER.

(READ BEFORE THE INTERNATIONAL SOCIETY OF ARCHÆOLOGISTS AT THE CONVENTION IN ST. LOUIS, SEPTEMBER 27TH, 1913.)*

It is no great venture to assert that there are comparatively few people living in the Middle West who are cognizant of the fact that the greatest specimen of primitive pictorial art in America survived on the banks of the Father-of-Waters until the year 1847, when after an existence of hundreds of years, perhaps, it fell before the hand of Progress.

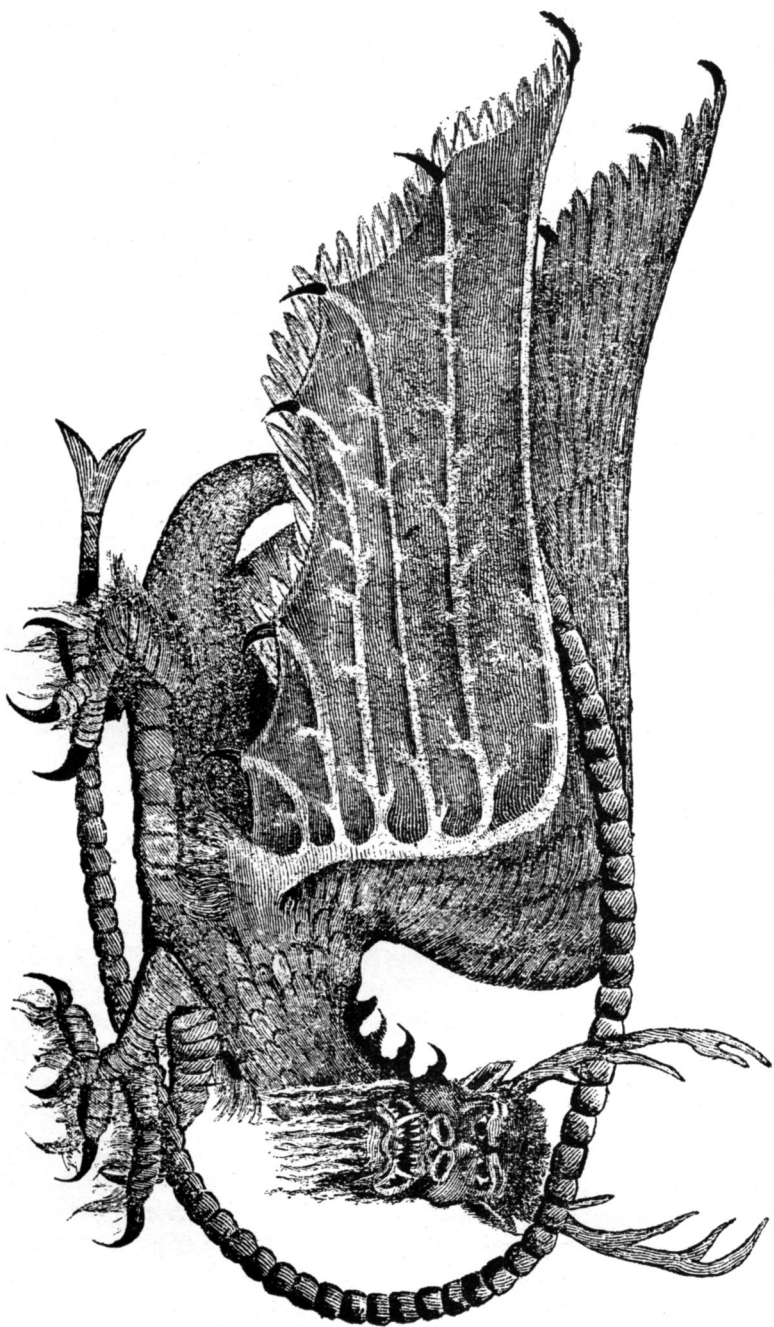
This masterpiece of America's aboriginal artists was the pictograph known as the "Piasa," which was painted on the smooth face of the bluff a short distance above Alton, (Ill.), at that point where Piasa creek empties into the Mississippi. A recent writer says the painting was placed at a height of eighty feet above the river.

Since 1673, men have endeavored to solve the mystery surrounding the Piasa, since it was in the latter part of June, that year, that white men first gazed on this remarkable work. These men were the Jesuit Jacques Marquette, and his companion explorer, Louis Joliet, who were descending the mighty river in canoes. Marquette's description of the Piasa is by far the most elaborate that has come down to us. Translated by R. G. Thwaites in "Jesuit Relations" it is as follows:

"While Skirting some rocks, which by their height and Length inspired awe, We saw upon one of them two painted Monsters which at first made Us afraid, and upon which the boldest savages dare not long rest their eyes. They are as large as a calf; They have Horns on their heads Like those of a deer, a horrible look, red eyes, a beard like a tiger's, a face somewhat like a man's, body covered with scales, and so long a tail that it

*The writer wishes to acknowledge his indebtedness to the writings of Mrs. Clara Kern Bayliss of Macomb, Illinois, in the preparation of this paper.

THE PIASA BIRD



winds all around the body, passing above the head and going back between the legs, ending in a Fish's tail. Green, red and black are the three colors composing the Picture. Moreover, these two Monsters are so well painted that we cannot believe that any savage is their author; for good painters in France would find it difficult to paint so well—and, besides, they are so high up on the rock that it is difficult to reach that place conveniently to paint them. Here is approximately The shape of these monsters, as we have faithfully copied it."

Francis Parkman, in his volume on La Salle, says, referring to Marquette's drawing, above mentioned:

"Marquette made a drawing of these two monsters, but it is lost. I have, however, a fac-simile of a map made a few years later, by order of the Intendant Duchesneau, which is decorated with the portrait of one of them answering to Marquette's description, and probably copied from his drawing.

William McAdams, in "Records of Ancient Races" says:

"We have received, through the kindness of Mr. Parkman, a copy of the portrait of which he speaks; but we cannot agree with the historian in believing that it answers to Marquette's description, or refers to the well-known figure that once adorned the bluff at Alton."

According to the testimony of Marquette, then, it appears that there were representations of two monsters on the bluff when white men first explored this country. In later years, however, one had disappeared some time prior to the destruction of the other.

Hennepin, in his "Continuation of the New Discovery of a vast Country in America" interprets Marquette's language substantially as does Thwaites, with but one exception. He says the horns were those of a "Wild-Goat." John G. Shea's translation of Marquette agrees with Thwaites in all but one particular. He says: "The tail (is) so long that it twice makes the turn of the body."

Aligned with Thwaites, also, are Francis Parkman and Davidson and Stuve, joint authors of a history of Illinois, who say, in addition, that the pictographs were objects of Indian worship.

The next European to actually see the painting of the Piasa was the Recollect Louis Hennepin. He came by shortly after the 24th of April, 1680, and had the following to relate:

"I had quite forgot to relate that the Illinois had told us that towards the Cape which I have called in my map St.

Anthony, near the nation of the Messorites, there were some Tritons and other Sea Monsters painted which the boldest men durst not look upon, there being some Inchantment in their face. I thought this was a story, but when we came near the place they had mentioned we saw instead of these monsters a Horse and some other Beasts painted upon the rock with Red Colors by the Savages. The Illinois had told us likewise that the rock on which these dreadful Monsters stood was so steep that no man could climb up to it, but had we not been afraid of the savages more than of the Monsters we had certainly got up to them. There is a common Tradition amongst the people that a great number of Miamis were drowned in that place, being pursued by the Savages of Matsegamie, and since that time the Savages going by the rock use to smook and offer Tobacco to these Beasts to appease, as they say, the Manitou, that is, in the Language of the Algonquins and Arcadians, an Evil Spirit, which the Iroquois call Otkon, but the name is the only thing they know of him. While I was at Quebec I undertood M. Joliet had been upon the Mississippi and obliged to return without going down the River because of the Monsters I have spoke of who had frightened him * * * and having an opportunity to know the truth of that Storey from M. Jolliet himself, * * * I asked him whether he had been as far as the Arkansas. That Gentleman answered me that the Outtaouats had often spoke to him of these Monsters, but that he had never gone further than the Hurons and Outtaouats" who lived in the region to the south and east of Georgian Bay, in Ontario. Hennepin's general reputation among historians renders it unnecessary for us to comment on his refutation of Marquette.

Along came Anastasius Douay, likewise a Recollect priest, some time between August 26 and September 5th, 1687. He followed blithely in the footsteps of Hennepin, when commenting on Marquette's description he says:

"It is said that they saw painted monsters that the boldest would have difficulty to look at, and that there was something supernatural about them. This frightful monster is a horse painted on a rock with matachia," an old term for paint,—“and some other wild beasts made by the Indians. It is said that they can not be reached, and yet I touched them without difficulty. The truth is that the Miamis, pursued by the Matsigamea, having been drowned in the river, the Indians

ever since that time present tobacco to these grotesque figures whenever they pass, in order to appease the manitou."

The next visitor to the painted bluff was Jean St. Cosme, who said:

"On the 6th of December we embarked on the Micissippi, after making about six leagues we found the great river of the Missouri, * * * * three or four leagues (further) we found on the left a rock having some figures painted on it, for which, it is said the Indians have some veneration. They are now almost effaced." This passage very evidently refers to the paintings of the Piasa, which we would never suspect on reading it. Shea's translation, the only one available, and which is used above, makes it impossible for St. Cosme to have seen the Piasa. That is evident when we consider the following: After mentioning his embarking on the Mississippi, St. Cosme says:

"After making about six leagues we found the great river of the Missouri"—so far no mention of the pictographs, which were located between the mouth of the Illinois, where he embarked on the Mississippi, and the mouth of the Missouri, where he now is; continuing, he says: "Three or four leagues (further)"—the word further being supplied by Shea—"we found on the left a rock having some figures painted on it;" thereby placing the painted rock somewhere, about twelve miles, approximately, below the mouth of the Missouri, which would be directly opposite St. Louis. Those of us who know the topography of the country can testify that there is no such bluff opposite this city. The fact of the matter is that the river bluff ends abruptly at Alton, eight miles above the mouth of the Missouri, and does not again appear for a distance of seventy-five or eighty miles below the Missouri. Thus does Shea make it impossible for St. Cosme to have seen the Piasa. Nevertheless this slight discrepancy does not deter him from saying: "This is the Piasa or painted rock first mentioned by Marquette."

My own interpretation of the words of St. Cosme, done into the American language is as follows:

"On the 6th of December, 1699, we embarked on the Mississippi. After making about twenty-one miles—which is nearly the equivalent of six leagues—we found the Missouri river. At three or four leagues—which is about from eleven to fourteen miles—we found on the left a rock, and etc." As a matter of

fact, the distance from the Illinois to Piasa creek where the pictograph was located is about eleven and a half miles, thus making it entirely possible for St. Cosme to have seen it.

Then, for a period of one hundred and five years, no one who has written down his observations, or at least published them in permanent form, so far as I am able to discover, came by that bluff that held the mystery of the Piasa. The next record we have is that of Major Amos Stoddard, U. S. A., who came along some time between 1804 and 1812. He said:

"The * * * journals of Jolliet and Marquette were published, and they afford a pretty accurate description of the Country, its rivers, and productions. What they call Painted Monsters on the side of a high perpendicular rock, apparently inaccessible to man, between the Missouri and Illinois, and known to moderns by the name of Piasa, still remain in a good degree of preservation." Thwaites says Stoddard saw them in the year 1812.

McAdams says:

"We have in our possession a spirited pen-and-ink sketch, 12 by 15 inches in size, and purporting to represent the ancient painting described by Marquette. On the picture is inscribed the following in ink; 'Made by William Dennis, April 3d, 1825.'" So the said Mr. Dennis was the next to record the existence of the Piasa. McAdams does not go into details concerning this drawing.

In March, 1836, Doctor John Russell, at one time professor of Greek and Latin at Shurtleff College, in Upper Alton, Ill., visited the locality of the painted bluff. In July, of that same year, he handed down to posterity the following:

"No part of the United States, not even the highlands of the Hudson, can vie, in wild and romantic scenery, with the bluffs of Illinois on the Mississippi, between the mouths of the Missouri and Illinois rivers. On one side of the river, often at the water's edge, a perpendicular wall of rock rises to the height of some hundred feet. Generally on the opposite shore is a level bottom or prairie of several miles in extent, extending to a similar bluff that runs parallel with the river. One of these ranges commences at Alton and extends * * * * for many miles along the left bank of the Mississippi. In descending the river to Alton, the traveler will observe, between that town and the mouth of the Illinois, a narrow ravine through which a small stream discharges its waters into the Mississippi. This stream

is the Piasa. Its name is Indian, and signifies in the Illini, '*The bird that devours men!*' Near the mouth of this stream, on the smooth and perpendicular face of the bluff, at an elevation which no human art can reach, is cut the figure of an enormous bird, with its wings extended. The animal which the figure represents was called by the Indians the Piasa. From this is derived the name of the stream.

"The tradition of the Piasa is still current among the tribes of the Upper Mississippi, and those who have inhabited the valley of the Illinois, and is briefly this:

"Many thousand moons before the arrival of the palefaces, when the great Magalonyx and Mastadon, whose bones are now dug up, were still living in the land of green prairies, there existed a bird of such dimensions that he could easily carry off in his talons a full grown deer. Having obtained a taste for human flesh, from that time he would prey on nothing else. He was artful as he was powerful, and would dart suddenly and unexpectedly upon an Indian, bear him off into one of the caves of the bluff, and devour him. Hundreds of warriors attempted for years to destroy him, but without success. Whole villages were nearly depopulated, and consternation spread through all the tribes of the Illini.

"Such was the state of affairs when Ouatogo the great chief of the Illini, whose fame extended beyond the great lakes, separating himself from the rest of his tribe, fasted in solitude for the space of a whole moon, and prayed to the Great Spirit, The Master of Life, that he would protect his children from the Piasa.

"On the last night of the fast the Great Spirit appeared to Ouatogo in a dream, and directed him to select twenty of his bravest warriors, each armed with a bow and poisoned arrows, and conceal them in a designated spot. Near the place of concealment another warrior was to stand in open view, as a victim for the Piasa, which they must shoot the instant he pounced upon his prey.

"When the chief awoke in the morning, he thanked the Great Spirit, and returning to his tribe told them his vision. Ouatogo offered himself as the victim. He was willing to die for his people. Placing himself in open view on the bluffs, he soon saw the Piasa perched on the cliff eyeing his prey. The chief drew up his manly form to his utmost height, and, planting his feet firmly upon the earth, he began to chant the death-song

of an Indian warrior. The moment after, the Piasa arose into the air, and swift as the thunderbolt darted down on his victim. Scarcely had the horrid creature reached his prey before every bow was sprung and every arrow was sent quivering to the feather into his body. The Piasa uttered a fearful scream, that sounded far over the opposite side of the river, and expired. Ouatogo was unharmed. Not an arrow, not even the talons of the bird, had touched him. The Master of Life, in admiration of Ouatogo's deed, had held over him an invisible shield.

"There was the wildest rejoicing among the Illini, and the brave chief was carried in triumph to the council house, where it was solemnly agreed that, in memory of the great event in their nation's history, the image of the Piasa should be engraved on the bluff.

"Such is the Indian tradition. Of course I cannot vouch for its truth. This much, however, is certain, that the figure of a huge bird, cut in the solid rock, is still there, and at a height that is perfectly inaccessible. How, and for what purpose it was made, I leave it for others to determine. Even at this day an Indian never passes the spot in his canoe without firing his gun at the figure of the Piasa. The marks of the balls on the rock are almost innumerable.

"Near the close of March of the present year—1836—I was induced to visit the bluffs below the mouth of the Illinois river, above that of the Piasa. My curiosity was principally directed to the examination of a cave, connected with the above tradition as one of those to which the bird had carried his human victims.

"Preceded by an intelligent guide, who carried a spade, I set out on my excursion. The cave was extremely difficult of access, and at one point in our progress I stood at an elevation of one hundred and fifty feet on the perpendicular face of the bluff, with barely room to sustain one foot. The unbroken wall towered above me, while below was the river.

"After a long and perilous climb we reached the cave, which was about fifty feet above the surface of the river. By the aid of a long pole placed on a projecting rock, and the upper end touching the mouth of the cave, we succeeded in entering it. Nothing could be more impressive than the view from the entrance to the cavern. The Mississippi was rolling in silent grandeur beneath us. High over our heads a single cedar tree hung its branches over the cliff, and on one of the dead dry

limbs was seated a bald eagle. No other sign of life was near us; a Sabbath stillness rested on the scene. Not a cloud was visible on the heavens; not a breath of air was stirring. The broad Mississippi was before us, calm and smooth as a lake. The landscape presented the same wild aspect it did before it had met the eye of the white man. The roof of the cavern was vaulted, and at the top was hardly less than twenty feet high. The shape of the cavern was irregular, but so far as I could judge, the bottom would average twenty by thirty feet. The floor of the cavern throughout its whole extent was one mass of human bones. Skulls and other bones were mingled in the utmost confusion. To what depth they extended I was unable to decide, but we dug to the depth of 3 or 4 feet in every part of the cavern, and still we found only bones. The remains of thousands must have been deposited here. How and by whom, and for what purpose, it is impossible to conjecture."

Several years after the publication of this tradition, McAdams wrote Professor Russell in regard thereto. "He answered that there was a somewhat similar tradition among the Indians, but he admitted, to use his own words, that the story was '*somewhat illustrated.*'"

In June, 1838, A. D. Jones visited the spot and incorporated his observations and gleanings in a little book called "Illinois and the West." Jones' version of the Illini tradition says that the man-destroying bird which took up its home in the lofty peaks near Alton, had wings clothed with thunder, making a fearful noise in its heavy flight; its talons, four in number, were like the eagle's; its tail was of huge dimensions. "After the distribution of firearms among the Indians," he says, "bullets were substituted for arrows, and even to this day no savage presumes to pass the spot without discharging his rifle and raising his shout of triumph. I visited the spot in June (1838) and examined the image, and the ten thousand bullet marks on the cliff seemed to corroborate the tradition related to me in the neighborhood.

"So lately as the passage of the Sac and Fox delegations down the river on their way to Washington, there was a general discharge of their rifles at the Piasau Bird. On arriving at Alton, they went ashore in a body and proceeded to the bluffs, where they held a solemn war council, concluding the whole with a splendid war dance, under the cliff on which was the image
* * * * "

"Another author" mentioned by McAdams, but whose name he fails to give, saw the picture and described it in the year 1844.

What is, probably, the most satisfactory picture of the Piasa is contained in an old German publication entitled "The Valley of the Mississippi Illustrated." It contains "eighty illustrations from nature by H. Lewis." It was published in 1839. McAdams believed this to have been a faithful sketch of what the German artist saw dimly outlined just prior to 1839. The account accompanying this sketch tells of the tradition, and says the pictograph was growing dim and showed evidence of great age. "In the German picture there is shown, just behind the rather dim outlines of a second face, a ragged crevice, as though of a fracture. Part of the bluff's face might have fallen and thus nearly destroyed one of the monsters; for in later years writers speak of but one figure."

Many years later, Mr. W. H. Allen related to McAdams, how, on days when the atmosphere was full of moisture, or after a very wet period, the figure on the rock could be seen much plainer. And this may have been the case when the German artist came along in '39, and the reason why he failed to get the picture of the second monster in its entirety was because the weather was unfavorable. Hon. P. A. Armstrong relates, in his monograph on the Piasa, what he claimed was a tradition told him by the Miamis in 1827, the substance of which is that the Miamis and Metchegamies one day clashing in battle, in the heat of the fray two enormous birds swooped down and bore away two chieftains of the Miamis, which threw their followers into a panic, resulting in their losing the day. From this blow, they never recovered.

* * * * *

"In the myths of many people a great bird is the agent of the chief deity, if not the deity himself," so says the historian Bancroft.

Many myths akin to that of the Piasa can be found by a study of the mythology of the American Indians, some bearing a striking resemblance to that of the Piasa. There are the Passamaquoddy of Maine who think their thunder-bird resembles a human being, with the exception that it has wings.

The Kaloo bird of the Canadian Micmacs could catch a man in his talons and carry him away.

The Omahas, Poncas and Sioux have thunder-birds and thunder-men.

The Dakota and Modocs relate myths wherein the thunder-birds are watched during the process of eating human beings.

The Medicine Animal of the Winnebagoes, seen only by the medicine-men, closely resembles in form the painting of the Piasa.

There have been numerous attempts to connect the Piasa Bird with the early geologic ages in America. Theories have been advanced wherein the Piasa assumes the form of a living creature, an actual breathing denizen of the plains and forests along the Mississippi; but let us not be deceived, for think what a wonderful, intricate creature this must have been with horns on its head like a deer, the face of a human being, a beard like a tiger's, great red eyes, wings as large as an eagle's, a tail that would have been approximately 15 or 20 feet long, a body covered with scales, and that very essential asset to navigation a rudder like that of a fish on the end of the tail; the whole creature being done into livid hues of green and red by nature. Surely in the whole scale of evolution we can find no such creature.